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## **THE DEPARTMENT OF THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS - A BRIEF HISTORY**

This article has been contributed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The Department of External Affairs, as it was first named, was one of seven departments of State created in 1901 to service the new Australian Federal Government in Melbourne. It was curiously titled in that the six federating colonies very explicitly had declared their aversion to independence from the British Empire centered on London. The Federation saw independence as the probable ultimate point in Australia's evolution; for the time being, they preferred the economic and military comfort to be had in a powerful empire and for them and for the Imperial Parliament which gave its legitimising blessing to the enterprise, the new colonial Federation was no more self-governing or independent than had been its component colonies, now called States. Moreover, while the colonies were happy to surrender their potential for separate evolution towards independence, they were jealous enough of their separateness to want only limited union and they carefully limited the functions granted to the new Federal Government.

One function which the colonies did grant however, was primacy in dealings with London, the Federation's only legitimate point of contact with the world outside. The early federal Prime Ministers, whether also Ministers for External Affairs or not (and most of them were), used the Department of External Affairs as their secretariat, primarily for their dealings with London through the Governor-General in Australia and the British Colonial Office. When the Prime Minister's Department was instituted in 1911, the Department of External Affairs lost its principal *raison d'être*, and in 1916 it was abolished.

After the World War I, international politics quickly centered on individual nation States rather than empires and when the League of Nations was established in a serious effort to resolve world conflict, its covenant was so framed as to allow membership to self-governing colonies like Australia.

Australia was as anxious as ever to remain part of a strong British Empire, but separate membership of the League of Nations after the War forced on her a degree of separate international political activity. For one thing, she now administered the former German colony of New Guinea under mandate, with accountability to the League. It was mainly to meet obligations associated with League membership that, in 1921, a Department of External Affairs was re-established in Melbourne (the seat of Federal Government not moving to Canberra until 1927). This, though, was a department more in name than in fact: its Minister until 1932 was the Prime Minister of the day, its permanent head was the permanent head of the Prime Minister's Department, and it enjoyed no separate budgetary allocation. In fact, it functioned as, and was known as, the External Affairs branch of the Prime Minister's Department.

During the 1920s complex and subtle changes were made to relations between the United Kingdom and the white settler societies overseas - so subtle that scarcely anyone in Australia at the time fully comprehended their significance. One outcome was that where formerly Australian federal Ministers had access to the crown through United Kingdom Ministers, now only Australian Ministers would advise the crown on Australian federal matters, and the monarch's representative, the Governor-General, no longer would be as well the agent of the United Kingdom government. This meant that Australia now could engage in separate diplomatic dealings with foreign States. However, Australia still saw herself as essentially a British State and for economic, strategic and sentimental reasons, Australian governments, always fearful of threat to Australia's long lines of communication, were in no hurry to take Australia into independent diplomacy. Australia had been pulled along unwillingly in the 1920s in the wake of Canada, the Irish Free State and South Africa which differed from Australia in history and ethnic composition and, in the case of the former two, could relax in their physical proximity to great powers which must defend them in defending themselves.

It was not until 1935, therefore, that an Australian Federal Government, reacting to an ominous international situation, created at least the potential for an Australian foreign office. The Department of External Affairs in 1935 was separated from the Prime Minister's Department and given its own permanent head (Colonel W. R. Hodgson, whose background was in military intelligence) and its own budgetary allocation. It was a tiny department of half a dozen officers with little experience in international diplomacy. The Department began at once to recruit university graduates but, when it was decided in 1939 that Australia should proceed to open diplomatic posts overseas, the Department could not yet provide officers to head those posts. The first Minister to the United States in 1940 was R. G. Casey, formerly Minister for Supply, though in the 1920s an officer of the Department; the first Minister to Japan in the same year was Sir John Latham, Chief Justice of the High Court, though in 1932-34 Minister for External Affairs; the first High Commissioner to Canada, also in 1940, was Sir William Glasgow, a former soldier and politician; the first Minister to China in 1941 was Sir Federic Eggleston, a former Victorian politician. It was not until 1945 that career officers from the Department were thought ready to serve as heads of mission.

A feeling that Australia had suffered for lack of her own sources of information in the late 1930s, fear of physical vulnerability during World War II, the post-war emergence of nation states in Asia under indigenous governments and renewed emphasis on international organisation for the peaceful resolution of conflict all impelled Australia in the 1940s and early 1950s to rapidly expand the Department of External Affairs. Well into the 1950s the Department still had to look outside its own ranks for heads of mission. Some posts were held to be of such crucial significance as to need the appointment of former Cabinet Ministers able to speak for Australia with special knowledge and authority, and it was not until 1964 that a career diplomat was made ambassador in Washington (J. K. Waller) and even later (1980) before another man went to London as High Commissioner (Sir James Plimsoll). A High Commission in London, it might be noted, had been opened back in 1910 but for many years the High Commissioner was seen as little more than manager of Australia House, home to public servants working in London. Even after changes in imperial relations in the 1920s, High Commissioners in British countries were taken to represent government rather than heads of state - a distinction which survives to this day. In fact, because as a colonial Federation Australia at first limited its external dealings to London through the Prime Minister, the High Commission in London was administered by the Prime Minister's Department until 1972.

Australia has never had an elite diplomatic service separated from the rest of the federal public service but the Department has always handled its own recruitment and, apart from a few years in the 1940s when non-graduates were accepted, it has chosen graduates according to demanding criteria. By 1950 the selection policies were paying dividends and the Department and its diplomatic service seemed to have talent to spare; its officers on a number of occasions

being appointed to senior positions in other departments. It was at this time also that the first experienced diplomat was appointed as the Department's permanent head and at last a truly professional foreign service had emerged in Australia.

Although the days of the Department's constant expansion are largely past, its activities remain substantial. Since the 1940s, and irrespective of parties in power, it has been accepted in Canberra that Australia's survival and prosperity cannot be assured by military power or even solely by alliance diplomacy and that Australia's best strategy for survival lies in adopting an active and constructive international profile. This led Australia from the first to take a very active role at the United Nations and in the various organisations operating under its umbrella. It has also led Australia to react positively to the emergence of a host of states in the wake of the great decolonisation process which has been in train since the 1940s. Whereas at its birth in 1935 the Department serviced no missions overseas, it now handles relations with close to 150 countries from more than 90 overseas missions.

Today the Department has a staff of 1,770 officers in Canberra and 800 overseas, with a further 2,000 locally recruited staff overseas. Large and sophisticated communications systems and computerisation help cope with the need for frequent and immediate decision making from Canberra to all parts of the world. Some things have inevitably been lost. When the Department, like Canberra itself, was young and small, officers were known to take their dogs to work with them and one officer even rode a horse to work. There was a camaraderie which could not survive the great expansion.

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